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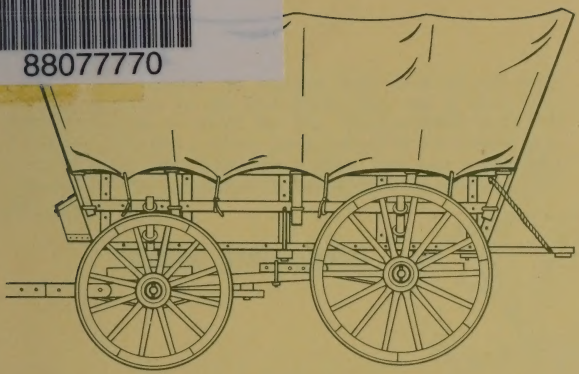

THE OREGON TRAIL

Migrating West . . . One Step at a Time . .

THE OREGON TRAIL

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Following these simple instructions from Joel Palmer's *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains,* 1845-1846, thousands upon thousands of people started over what has become known as one of the greatest mass overland migration routes in history: The Oregon Trail, corridor of western history.

In many ways, the Oregon Trail symbolized the West. Trapper mountain men, traders—all had a hand in the exploration and charting of the Trail; toward the last of the migration, the Overland Stage and Pony Express followed the Trail for a considerable distance, and finally the first transcontinental railroad, the Union Pacific followed parts of the same route. The Oregon Trail was the main stream of westward expansion.

And the reason for it all can be contained in the simple phrase: hopes for individuals betterment and freedom and the determination to try.

WHY AN OREGON TRAIL?

In 1837-1843, two things combined to make a mass migration westward not only possible but in many ways desirable. First was the international diplomatic: England was making distinct rumblings of ownership for this rich territory of Oregon. It was thought that an influx of Americans to settle in the area would cement the United States' claim and avoid further difficulties with England.

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At the same time, in 1837, the United States was rocked by a depression; money was tight, unemployment was high, and conditions in general were unacceptable for middle to low income people. In 1838 a man named Jason Lee, who earlier had spent some time in Oregon as a missionary, toured the eastern States giving lectures on the virtues of the west—Oregon in particular—and with the economic distress, his talks fell on very receptive ears.

In the spring of 1841 about 500 people assembled in a loose group at Independence, Missouri, on the Missouri River, the last "settled" point on the western frontier, and prepared for this journey west. They were not well organized; some had oxcarts, others mule and horse drawn wagons, not a few were afoot, and without a knowledgeable guide they quickly became discouraged. The expedition rapidly fell apart and the potential migrants dispersed—though about thirty of them finally made it to Oregon by traveling with trappers and a missionary party of Catholic priests.

THE TREK BEGINS . . .

The first truly organized and cohesive attempt was made on Oregon in the early spring of 1842. One hundred people, under Dr. Elijah White, gathered at Independence and, with a professional guide from Fort Hall, in what is now Idaho, set out for the Willamette Valley of western Oregon.

The object of their journey was both simple and staggering. They were going to Oregon; but between

the departure point and their goal lay two thousand miles of prairies, high mountains, parched deserts; hardships inconceivable to most of them. Many of the initial migrants were from rural midwestern and eastern communities, where town was a two hour ride from the farm. They were starting on a venture wherein it would be over two months before they were to see a fur trading post.

That they started at all required fortitude. But more than just beginning this incredible first migration, White's group made it; half of them settled in Oregon and the other half moved down to California the following year.

Yet Elijah White and the migrants did more than demonstrate courage; they showed that it could be done in spite of the hardships involved. They blazed the trail for future wagon trains.

It was like opening a flood gate. In 1843 approximately 875 people made the journey; in 1844, 400 migrants made it; in 1845-'46 over five thousand people completed the trek; in 1847-'48 thousands more (including the Mormons who journeyed on part of the Oregon Trail seeking religious freedom in the Salt Lake area) traveled west. With the discovery of gold in California in 1848 came a virtual explosion in travel on the Trail; in April of 1849 over 20,000 riches-seeking dreamers left for California and Oregon, and there were many more in May.

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BICENTENNIAL 1776-1976 AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The Bureau of Land Management administers about 457 million acres of national resource lands for the Nation in the American West and Alaska. All manner of resources, minerals, timber, range, water, recreation, etc., are managed in the public interest on these lands. Among other important resources managed and protected are pre-historic and historic sites, structures, rivers, and trails. Several hundred miles of the Oregon Trail, from just west of Casper, Wyoming, to the slopes of the Cascade Mountains in western Oregon, cross these public lands. As part of the national celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, the Bureau has marked this historic route and developed permanent interpretive roadside facilities as shown on the map.

Similar trail marking and wayside exhibits have been developed for two other Bicentennial Trails on public lands in the West. These are found along the Dominguez-Escalante 1776 Expedition route in New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona; and along the Pony Express Trail in Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada. Brochures on these two historic trails can be obtained in the BLM State and District offices where the Trails are located, or by writing to the Director's Office, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Interior Building, Washington, D.C., 20240.

Migrating West
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THE OREGON TRAIL

TWO THOUSAND MILES—ONE STEP AT A TIME

With our modern conveniences it is difficult to understand the problems encountered by the traveling immigrants. The distance we now cover in an hour in a automobile sometimes took them a whole week of hard work, struggle and, not infrequently, dying. A rainstorm now means a simple flick of the wiper switch; but in 1846 it could mean vicious flash-floods down dry riverbeds, impossibly mired wagons (some of which weighed over four thousand pounds fully loaded) and even drowning. The mountain pass we comfortably traverse in less than an hour often took the immigrants several days of pushing, pulling, loading and unloading the wagons time and again.

Just the trip could kill. In a dry summer, water sources would cease to exist; oxen would perish and families who had not brought sufficient water in barrels died of thirst. Other poorly planned caravans faced starvation when they found it impossible to live off the land—as some misinformed travelers had thought possible—and the family furniture they brought instead of the recommeded 200 pounds of flour per person proved to be a fatal luxury. The route of the Oregon Trail rapidly accumulated cast-off items; one traveler wrote: ''. . . I could have started a furniture store and equipped it from a ten mile stretch''.

But of all the danger of the Oregon Trail the one most dreaded was cholera. Just the name of this terrible disease could send panic surging through a wagon train. In 1849 over five thousand people died of cholera in St. Louis; rapidly it spread to the trains heading west for the gold fields of California. The mysterious nature of the affliction made it doubly frightening; a seemingly healthy person could develop a slight fever in the morning, become unconscious at noon and be dead by evening.

From 1860 on, Indians became more openly hostile, and attacks on wagon trains added to the dangers inherent in the trip and the cholera.

THE NEW LAND

In the end, evaluating what the immigrants achieved with their sacrifices is difficult. With bright hopes and an immense amount of innocent courage, close to two-hundred and seventy-five thousand Americans made the journey west from Independence, Missouri, between 1841 and 1869. Many of them died; there is a grave for every mile, and an almost uncountable number were injured. Most certainly none of them were the same people they had been after the four to six month journey.

Yet what they accomplished is incredible. With determination, sweat, and blood and muscle the Oregonians welded the northwest one-third of a continent to the rest of the Nation and left us a heritage of courage and determination that is a vital part of the American experience.

KEENEY WAYSIDE

Now 1516 miles from Independence, Missouri, and 130 days on the Trail, the emigrants would spend their first night in what was to become the State of Oregon.

By now, many who originally started from Independence, Missouri, had died. The survivors were worn down and dried out. Yet another month and 400 arduous miles still lay between them and their destination—the fertile Willamette Valley.

Compared to other passes on the Trail, Keeney was easily negotiated. Rutted remnants of the trail, cut deeply into the earth by the iron-tired wheels of the emigrants can still be seen.

MILNER WAYSIDE

As the Oregon Trail paralleled the Snake River in Idaho, emigrants would camp alongside the River. One can still identify the scars left by the wagons as they rolled over the lava rocks.

Not far from the Milner Wayside, the Snake River at one time descended forty feet into a pool through a narrow chute. This turbulent rapid was named "Caldron Linn" and was feared by all river travelers. Subsequent damming of the Snake River has tamed the fury of the "Caldron Linn".

FORT BRIDGER - 1843

Fort Bridger was the first fort built in the West, primarily for the purpose of engaging in the emigrant trade along the Oregon trail. The post, situated on Black's Fork, a tributary of the Green River, provided travel-weary emigrants the opportunity to replenish their supplies, repair gear, and trade tired, jaded horses for fresh ones.

Other posts available for westward traveling emigrants were Fort Kearney, Fort Laramie, Fort Caspar, Fort Hall, Fort Boise, Whitman Mission, and Fort Vancouver. All of these posts, excepting Fort Hall and Fort Boise, can be visited and are worthwhile sources for better understanding of our past.

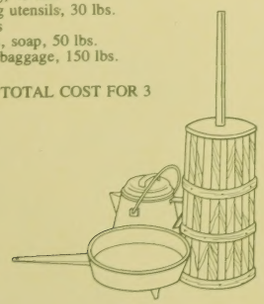
DEVIL'S GATE

Devil's Gate, the 370-foot high, 1500-foot long cleft, carved over the centuries by the Sweetwater River, was a major landmark on the Oregon Trail . . . . . A pleasant change for weary travelers coming across four days of rough, dry country from the North Platte River.

THE SUPPLIES

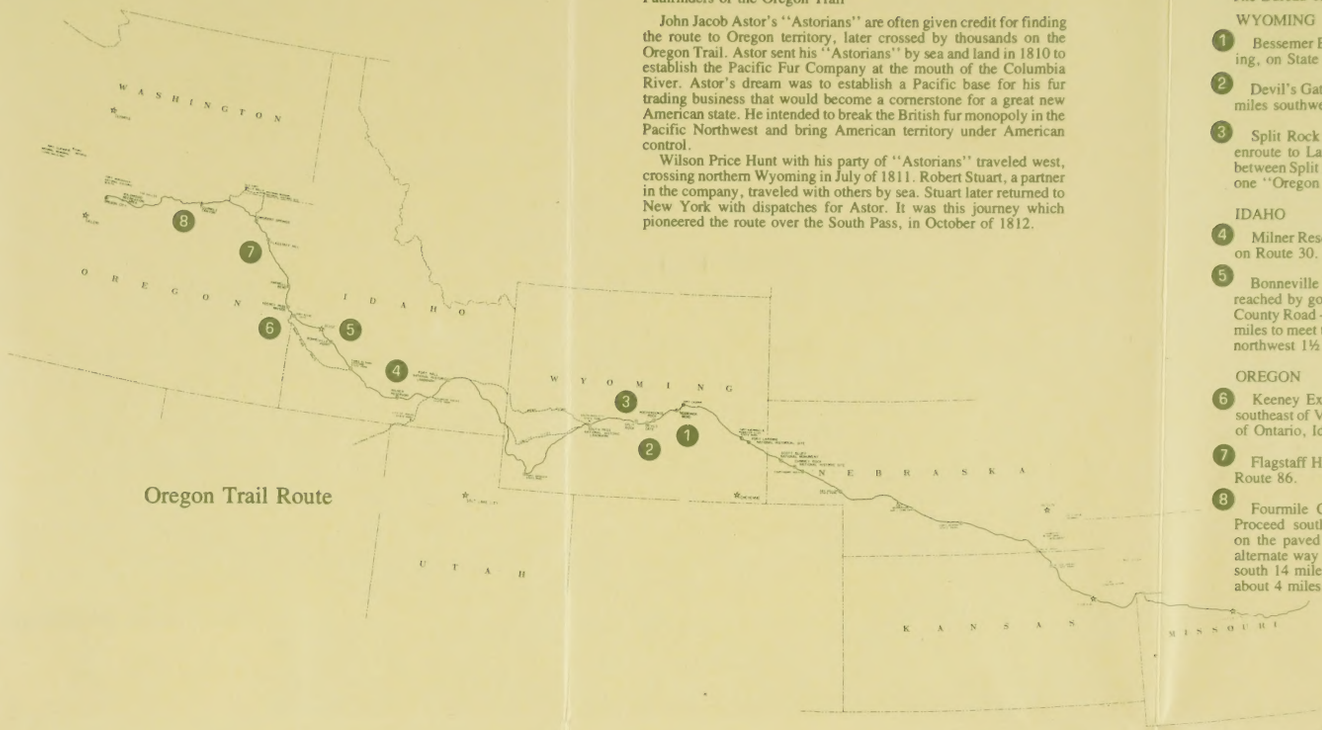
Total suggested supplies for three persons - one year with oxen team consisted of:

3 rifles at $20.00	$ 60.00
3 pairs of pistols at $15.00	45.00
5 barrels of Flour, 1080 lbs.	20.00
Bacon, 600 lbs.	30.00
Coffee, 100 lbs.	8.00
Tea, 5 lbs.	2.75
Sugar, 150 lbs.	7.00
Rice, 75 lbs.	3.75
Dried fruit, 50 lbs.	3.00
Salt and pepper, 50 lbs.	3.00
Saleratus, 10 lbs.	1.00
Lard, 50 lbs.	2.50
Lead, 30 lbs.	1.20
Tent, 30 lbs.	5.00
Bedding, 45 lbs.	22.50
Cooking utensils, 30 lbs.	4.00
Matches	1.00
Candles, soap, 50 lbs.	5.30
Private baggage, 150 lbs.	--
TOTAL COST FOR 3	$225.00



Supplies were stored compactly to insure room for all the necessary goods. Bacon was placed in sacks with one hundred pounds in each. In the case of high heat, it was urged that the sacks be placed in boxes surrounded by bran to prevent the fat from melting. Flour was placed in double canvas sacks, one hundred pounds per sack.

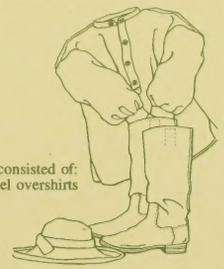
The Emigrants Guide to California
Joseph E. Ware, J. Halsall Publication
St. Louis, Missouri, 1849



Oregon Trail Route

THE EMIGRANTS

Settlers who traveled the Oregon Trail were by and large substantial citizens. In the first place, they had to have considerable resources to afford the trip. Roughly $800 to $1,200 was required to obtain a proper outfit and get by for a whole year without planting and harvesting a crop. Ordinary subsistence farmers never could accumulate capital on that scale without having a good farm to sell.



THE CLOTHES

Clothing for one man for three months consisted of:

- 2 red or blue, front button, flannel overshirts
- 2 woolen undershirts
- 2 pairs of thick cotton drawers
- 4 pairs of woolen socks
- 2 pairs of cotton socks
- 4 colored silk handkerchiefs
- 2 pairs of stout shoes for walking
- 1 pair of boots and shoes for horsemen
- 3 towels
- 1 gutta percha poncho
- 1 broad brimmed hat of soft felt
- 1 comb and brush
- 2 toothbrushes
- 1 lb. of castile soap
- 3 lbs. of bar soap for laundry
- 1 belt knife and small whetstone
- 1 coat and overcoat

Stout linen thread, large needles, beeswax, a few buttons, a paper of pins and a thimble with all the sewing products in a small cloth bag.

- The Prairie Traveler - A Handbook for Overland Expeditions
Randolph B. Marcy,
Harper Brothers Pub. N.Y. 1859

Pathfinders of the Oregon Trail

John Jacob Astor's "Astorians" are often given credit for finding the route to Oregon territory, later crossed by thousands on the Oregon Trail. Astor sent his "Astorians" by sea and land in 1810 to establish the Pacific Fur Company at the mouth of the Columbia River. Astor's dream was to establish a Pacific base for his fur trading business that would become a cornerstone for a great new American state. He intended to break the British fur monopoly in the Pacific Northwest and bring American territory under American control.

Wilson Price Hunt with his party of "Astorians" traveled west, crossing northern Wyoming in July of 1811. Robert Stuart, a partner in the company, traveled with others by sea. Stuart later returned to New York with dispatches for Astor. It was this journey which pioneered the route over the South Pass, in October of 1812.

TRAILS END

At least 20,000 persons died along the Oregon Trail. Most trailside gravesides are unknown, but road construction occasionally uncovers lonely emigrant graves. A monument near Meacham, Oregon, marks the grave of an unknown man, woman, and child buried in their blue and yellow wagon box.

Somewhat changed by distance, time and the hardships of their overland experience, the overlanders set about wresting a new life from the western lands. Like veterans of a long war, they were never quite the same again.

The Bureau of Land Management Oregon Trail Waysides:

WYOMING

1. Bessemer Bend Wayside is 12 miles southwest of Casper, Wyoming, on State Highway 220.
2. Devil's Gate Wayside is located 65 miles north of Rawlins, or 72 miles southwest of Casper on Highway 220.
3. Split Rock Wayside is 65 miles north of Rawlins on U.S. 287 enroute to Lander, Wyoming. There are about 35 highway miles between Split Rock and Devil's Gate Waysides. The sites are located one "Oregon Trail day" apart—about 20 miles.

IDAHO

4. Milner Reservoir Exhibit is located 7 miles west of Burley, Idaho on Route 30. Look for the Milner Reservoir signs.
5. Bonneville Point Exhibit is located southeast of Boise. It may be reached by going 10 miles east on Interstate 80 N to Blacks Creek County Road - Interchange #64. Proceed north on the county road 2 miles to meet the gravel BLM road on your left. This road takes you northwest 1½ miles to the point-of-interest.

OREGON

6. Keeney Exhibit is located on County Road #570, just 8 miles southeast of Vale, Oregon. Vale is on U.S. 26 and 20, 16 miles west of Ontario, Idaho.
7. Flagstaff Hill is located 5 miles east of Baker, Oregon, on State Route 86.
8. Fourmile Canyon Exhibit is southeast of Arlington, Oregon. Proceed south out of Arlington 4 miles on State 19; turn left on the paved county Road toward Cecil for 12 more miles. An alternate way of getting to the wayside is to take State Highway 75 south 14 miles to Cecil and take the gravel road west out of town about 4 miles.

THE WAGON AND TEAM

Six mule team wagons were the preferred mode of travel, but oxen were often used as they were cheaper, less liable to stampede and covered long distances better. The cost for six mules was $600.00 while for eight oxen it was $200.00. The harness cost $24.00.

Wagons for trail travel were of the simplest construction, they cost $85.00 each. They were light, strong, and carried on sturdy wheels. It was recommended that wheels be made of bois-d'arc, osage, orangewood or white oak. Bolt ends should be riveted on the running gear to prevent accidents. Concord, New Hampshire, Spring Wagons were preferred. The wagon cover was $100.00.

Total of oxen, harness and wagon and cover - $409.00.

The Prairie Traveler - A Handbook for Overland Expedition,
Randolph B. Marcy, Harper Brothers Pub., N.Y., 1859

EVENING'S REST

The evening camp was formed by about 5:00 p.m. after 15-20 miles of travel. The wagons were positioned into circles or hollow squares and tents were pitched. Livestock grazed close by, but were penned inside the circle of wagons in time of trouble.

Around the campfire, time was taken out for such things as cooking, mending clothes, letter writing, card playing, keeping up diaries, fixing wagons, and listening to the fiddle or jew's harp.